

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## "LOOK ALIKE" SEA TURTLES TO BE TREATED AS ENDANGERED

Three non-endangered species of sea turtles that look like their endangered cousins have been proposed as the first species to be treated as endangered under the "Similarity of Appearance" clause of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The proposal, published jointly with the National Marine Fisheries Service of the Department of Commerce in the Federal Register, would treat the green sea turtle, loggerhead sea turtle, and Pacific ridley sea turtle as "endangered" because they so closely resemble three other species already listed as endangered: the hawksbill, Atlantic ridley, and leatherback. The rulemaking is necessary because the endangered turtles cannot properly be protected from commercial exploitation since many specimens are captured each year and brought into the United States mistakenly or fraudulently labeled as belonging to one of the three look-alike species. Interested persons have until September 14, 1976, to comment on the proposal.

Distinguishing between legal and illegal species is difficult in the case of adult specimens and is especially pronounced in the case of turtle parts, products, or young specimens of species. Many crocodilians pose this same problem. Expert herpetologists have acknowledged that in some instances after turtle oil is processed into perfume, turtle meat into soup, and turtle hide into shoes or leather goods, there is no way to distinguish the meat and hide of one sea turtle from that of another. Differentiation is also very difficult if the item to be identified is merely a small piece of shell as opposed to the entire carapace. Accurate identification of some young specimens is practically impossible due to the lack of distinct coloration. In fact, even in the case of complete adult specimens of the Atlantic and Pacific ridleys, differentiation is a difficult process for biologists.

The traffic in turtle parts and products is enormous and is bolstered by new uses such as turtle leather as a fashion commodity and turtle oil for cosmetics. The relatively high returns for small catches of turtle encourage both legal exploitation and poaching. Turtle products include high protein meat, hide for leather items, shell for jewelry and curios, and calipee for soup and health food preparations.

At the entry port of El Paso alone, approximately 10,000 turtle skins, more than 11,000 pairs of boots and shoes, and nearly 2,000 boot parts were imported in a single 6-month period from May 1975 to November 1975. At the port of Miami, shipments of more than 10 tons of turtle meat are documented. Large quantities of turtle soup, turtle oil, turtle shell jewelry, and turtle curios also are brought in. Fish and Wildlife Service prosecutions

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of importers reveal that commercial dealers cannot tell the difference between the endangered and unlisted species. And when, as in the El Paso and Miami importations referred to above, identification is not possible, it is quite possible that some of the volume is composed of endangered parts and products.

At present, when the Government cannot prove that a given item is from an endangered turtle, rather than a green, loggerhead, or Pacific ridley turtle, prosecution for an Endangered Species Act violation is impossible. Yet if the item is in fact from an endangered turtle, and prosecution is prevented by its resemblance to an unlisted species, the loss of control over the endangered species is substantial. The harm to the endangered species is the same whether or not the item can be distinguished. And when this harm is repeated unchecked by prosecution for thousands of items, it poses a very real threat to the endangered species. This threat could be controlled if prosecution were made possible by treating the presently unlisted species as endangered.

Although the proposed rulemaking generally would prohibit persons subject to the jurisdiction of the United States from taking or importing green, Pacific ridley, or loggerhead sea turtles, such a prohibition should not be a hardship in any area of the Nation. The value of all sea turtles landed in the continental United States, about \$50,000 in 1971, is insignificant in relation to overall U.S. fisheries.

The proposal would allow the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service to issue permits for the taking of turtles provided the applicant supplies reliable data which adequately identifies the turtles so as to distinguish them from endangered species.

Importation of sea turtles or products from foreign sources is far greater than those derived from U.S. fishermen. Imports of products identified as green sea turtle in 1970 included 113,900 pounds of meat, 25,195 pounds of calipee (used to make soup), 2,500 pounds of oil, and 2,200 skins. In 1971, almost 45,000 skins identified as Pacific ridley were imported. Such imports are probably substantially higher at present, but exact figures are unavailable.

Persons affected by import regulations would include foreign turtle fishermen and processing plants, American importers, canners, and distributors of turtle products, turtle shell jewelry manufacturers, and distributors and enterprises that raise and market captive turtles. Importation of these products, however, may be permitted under a permit.

The green, loggerhead, and Pacific ridley sea turtles were themselves proposed for the threatened species list last year by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. The proposal came after a joint status review by both agencies found seriously decreased populations of these species throughout the world.

Persons wishing to comment on the current proposal should write to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 19183, Washington, D.C. 20036, or to Director, National Marine Fisheries Service, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C. 20235.